

Witnessing verbal aggression: role of customers' self-conscious emotions

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the widespread effects of service actors' verbal aggression on witness customers' intentions toward the service organizations through their self-conscious emotions. The moderating roles of the witness customers' empathic tendencies and the source of aggression are also examined.

Design/methodology/approach – In two scenario-based experiments and by adopting a multifoci approach, severity of mistreatment (aggression vs incivility vs no-mistreatment) and source of mistreatment (employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) were manipulated to test distinctive effects of witnessing aggression on self-conscious emotions and intentions.

Findings – This study shows that witnessing aggression during service experiences negatively influences customers' intentions towards the service organization through self-conscious emotions. Moreover, empathic tendencies of customers make these effects more pronounced. It is also shown that witnessing employee-to-employee aggression has a stronger effect on self-conscious emotions and intentions than customer-to-customer aggression.

Research limitations/implications – This paper uncovers the distinctive effects of aggressive behaviors of service actors on self-conscious emotions from the third-party perspective. It is also shown that empathic tendencies can be detrimental to service organizations in certain conditions.

Practical implications – The results warn service managers against verbal aggression because of its negative effects on witness customers. It is suggested that they should try to clarify the incident and restore justice in front of the witnesses.

Originality/value – This paper is one of the first attempts to investigate the distinctive effects of witnessing aggression during service experiences and the roles of self-conscious emotions and empathic tendencies.

Keywords Empathy, Incivility, Frontline service employees, Aggression, Witnessing, Self-conscious emotions, Other customers, Appraisal theory, Deonance theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Aggressive behavior displayed by various parties is a major issue in interactional service contexts. It has been observed that both employees and customers frequently engage in verbally aggressive behaviors during service experiences while at settings such as restaurants and hotels. (Fisk *et al.*, 2010; Hershcovis and Barling, 2010), and the direct and indirect victims of such behavior need to be protected (Yagil, 2017). During these experiences, customers are involved in such dysfunctional interactions not only as direct targets but also as observers (Henkel *et al.*, 2017). Although earlier studies in the services literature tended to predominantly focus on the effects of direct victimization by employee or customer aggression, in service contexts, the act of witnessing can also have profound, widespread effects. Through vicarious processes, customer and

employee aggression can threaten the well-being of interactive service environments and the provision of services to a greater extent than, perhaps, ever anticipated. On this issue, scholars have started shifting their attention to observer customers' reactions to various kinds of mistreatment (Porath *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Henkel *et al.*, 2017; Karabas *et al.*, 2019; Kim and Baker, 2019). By drawing on appraisal (Scherer, 2005; Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015) and deonance theories (Folger, 2001; Folger and Glerum, 2015), this study aims to investigate the potential relationships between witnessing multifoci verbal aggression (among employees and among other customers), the self-conscious emotions (i.e. shame, embarrassment and guilt) felt by witnesses and the negative outcomes for service organizations.

This study, as one of the first attempts to examine the distinctive effects of witnessing multifoci aggression during service experiences, seeks to contribute to the services literature in four ways. First, through two experiments, this study focuses

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on bringing to light the widespread spillover effects of verbally aggressive behavior (such as shouting, swearing or engaging in other forms of verbal attacks) on intentions toward service organizations via self-conscious emotions, which are (not easily) reconstructed moral emotions that determine relations with service organizations. Verbal aggression brings harm to the sense of justice of third parties by violating moral and social codes in service environments. The key emotions that are elicited after appraisals of these violations are vicariously (or empathetically) experienced self-conscious emotions (Lickel *et al.*, 2005).

Second, this study focuses on the role of witnessing customers' empathic tendencies for the elicitation of self-conscious emotions and intentions. Empathy is critical for deontic justice, which makes it possible to appraise a given violation (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015) and develop a connection between the victims and the third parties who witness and appraise the moral violation (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). Although the services literature mostly focuses on the proactive role of empathy after service failures (Bove, 2019), in this context, it is proposed that empathy may lead to certain negative emotions (shame, guilt and embarrassment) by witnesses in the servicescape and increase negative intentions toward service organizations. In this way, aggression may lead to situations in which service managers need to control witnesses' empathic connection to the incident.

Third, as to date research has specifically focused on witnessing customer reactions to customer-to-employee (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Henkel *et al.*, 2017; Albrecht *et al.*, 2017; Kim and Baker, 2019), employee-to-employee (Porath *et al.*, 2010, 2011) and employee-to-customer (Karabas *et al.*, 2019) mistreatment, this study takes up the critical service roles of perpetrators and victims. Thus, our aim is to investigate the witnessing customers' reactions to multifoci aggression by comparing employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer verbal aggression. The power asymmetry between customers and employees may restrain the emotional capability of witnesses and lead to reactions on varying levels. A multifoci approach makes it possible to carry out a thorough investigation of aggression from the perspective of the witnessing customer.

Finally, this study aims to explore the distinctive effects of verbal aggression on witnesses. Some recent studies are tended to assume that aggression solely implies a more intense level of incivility (Hershcovis, 2011) and that while the outcomes of witnessing aggression and other types of mistreatment may be the same, they affect the same constructs in different levels (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Henkel *et al.*, 2017). However, this study proposes that witnessing aggression may have distinctive impacts on self-conscious emotions, which cannot be elicited by uncivil events that have low levels of intensity. In the following sections, the background on aggression in terms of appraisal and deonance and the phenomenon of the self-conscious emotions of witnessing customers are discussed with corresponding hypotheses.

Literature review

Multifoci verbal aggression and witnessing customers: the deonance perspective

This study conceptualizes (verbal) aggression as an observable form of behavior, which is expressed non-physically and has

profound interpersonal effects, as it brings harm to others (Glomb and Liao, 2003; Griffin and Lopez, 2005). Of course, aggression can also be manifested physically but this study mainly focuses on verbal aggression for theoretical clarity (Griffin and Lopez, 2005) and because it is a more widespread problem during service interactions than physical aggression (Yagil, 2017). These severe and overt forms of mistreatment (Porath *et al.*, 2011), which can be engaged in by both customers and frontline employees, violate moral standards and harm the sense of justice not only of the victims but also of third parties during service experiences (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Karabas *et al.*, 2019).

According to the deonance perspective of Folger (2001), the members of a social system are morally obliged to treat each other fairly during social interactions and third parties are required to engage in forms of behavior that uphold moral standards (Priesemuth and Schminke, 2019). In a related way, the deonance perspective theorizes that consumers also care about others' adherence to moral norms and try to cope with others' moral violations (e.g. verbal aggression) by punishing the responsible parties (Priesemuth *et al.*, 2017; Colquitt and Zipay, 2015) not only directly but also indirectly (Robinson *et al.*, 2014). As a reflection of this because of their deontic concerns, when someone witnesses aggressive interactions during service experiences, they may develop negative intentions toward service organizations and abandon a service organization that is indirectly associated with an aggressive mistreatment (Houshmand *et al.*, 2012; Dhanani and LaPalme, 2019; Porath *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, in this study, it is argued that the verbal aggression of both frontline employees and other customers may decrease witnessing customers' behavioral intentions toward the service organization, which include saying positive things about the service organization, recommending it to others and revisiting it (Cronin *et al.*, 2000):

H1a. Witnessing (employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) verbal aggression during service experiences has a negative effect on customers' behavioral intentions toward the service organizations in comparison to control conditions (no mistreatment).

However, research with multifoci approach (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010) still needs to be carried out to examine the comparative results of employee and customer aggression during service experiences. Verbal aggression among customers and among employees is taken up as a means of examining its comparative effects on witnesses. From the perspective of deonance theory (Folger, 2001), if witnesses evaluate a service organization associated with aggressive behaviors, they may seek to punish it (Reich and Hershcovis, 2015). At this point, it is important to clarify when service companies are responsible and should be punished for incidents of moral violations in service settings (Skarlicki and Kulik, 2004). Prior studies have shown that service organizations can be associated with norm-violating other customers; blame may be placed on the organization (Huang, 2010) and other-customers' wrongdoings may have spillover effects on customer intentions concerning a given organization (Curth *et al.*, 2014; Karaosmanoglu *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, from the customer perspective, employees are more integral components

of a service provider that is strongly associated with perceptions concerning service norms, standards and quality than other customers, who cannot be easily managed and/or controlled by service organizations (Kim and Lee, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that service organizations are (more) responsible for the behavior of their employees (than the behavior of their customers) and should be punished when their employees engage in moral violations. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the verbal aggression of organizational insiders (frontline employees) affects witnessing customers' intentions toward service organizations to a greater extent than outsiders (customers):

- H1b.* Behavioral intentions toward service organizations are impacted to a greater extent (negatively) if customers witness employee-to-employee aggression rather than customer-to-customer aggression. There are no significant differences in employee-related and customer-related control conditions.

Witnessing verbal aggression and emotional responses: self-conscious emotions

As posited by Folger and Glerum (2015), self-conscious emotions can also play an important role in explaining the deonance process. In this study, the vicarious elicitation of these emotions is deemed critical for describing witnesses' deontic reactions to service organizations. Self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt and embarrassment are self-related (and also other-related) moral emotions, "which motivate adherence to social norms and personal standards" (Else-Quest *et al.*, 2012, p. 947). From the perspective of appraisal theory, self-conscious emotions differ from other emotional classes. They require the direct attribution of moral violations to the self (Tangney and Tracy, 2012), whether vicariously (Lickel *et al.*, 2005) or empathetically (Welten *et al.*, 2012) elicited. Therefore, we argue that self-conscious emotions play active and powerful roles during appraisals of morally violating aggressive forms of behavior witnessed during service experiences.

From the perspective of the bystander customers, verbal aggression of others (employees or other customers) violates the social norms and moral standards of service environments. During service experiences, when a moral or social norm or code is violated by others, empathetically experienced self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt and embarrassment regulate the interactional social situation. This is because these emotions are also empathetic moral emotions that are activated by the subjectively evaluated impropriety of others (Krach *et al.*, 2011; Tangney and Tracy, 2012). For that reason, such emotions are also "other-conscious emotions" (Tangney *et al.*, 1996) that are vicariously experienced by others with the assistance of innate tendencies to empathize with others (Welten *et al.*, 2012; Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015).

Studies on the vicarious experiences of self-conscious emotions have primarily claimed that third parties elicit self-conscious emotions if they feel responsible for the negative incident or attribute the threat to their own self-identity (Lickel *et al.*, 2005; Daniels and Robinson, 2019). However, recent studies have posited the existence of another mechanism that

makes the elicitation of self-conscious emotions possible for third parties who are not responsible for the moral violation. As asserted by the appraisal theory of vicarious emotions (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015), empathy makes it possible for self-conscious emotions to be experienced by unrelated others in social environments (Kilian *et al.*, 2018; Krach *et al.*, 2011; Welten *et al.*, 2012). Such emotions are empathic emotions that are experienced "on behalf of others" or "with others" (Hawk *et al.*, 2011). Witnessing mistreatment empathetically elicits emotions because such behavior violates the moral codes of witnesses or their perceived sense of fairness (Priesemuth *et al.*, 2017). These forms of behavior lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment because witnesses may empathize with the situation of the victim. Notably, research has shown that aggressive behavior elicits the self-conscious emotions of the victims as the targets of aggressive behavior look internally and blame themselves for the situation (Felblinger, 2008). The deonance perspective also suggests that witnesses need to have an emotional connection with the victims rather than the perpetrators to reduce the stress brought on by norm violations (Herscovis and Bhatnagar, 2017). Pugh *et al.* (2018) also argue that the witnessing customer may elicit feelings of shame and embarrassment when a frontline employee publicly reprimands a customer. On the other hand, according to the appraisal theory of vicarious emotions (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015), even if the perpetrator of aggression is not ashamed, embarrassed or plagued by feelings of guilt, third parties may interpret the situation (not the emotional state of the aggressor) and may feel such emotions "on behalf of the perpetrator," which may lead witnessing customers to experience a more pronounced elicitation of self-conscious feelings. Therefore, it is expected that witnessing verbal aggression during service experiences elicits self-conscious emotions that are shared by the victims because witnesses are able to empathize more with the victim and interpret the situation of the perpetrator:

- H2.* Consumers' self-conscious emotion levels are significantly higher in situations in which (employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) verbal aggression is witnessed than those in which aggression is not observed.

Moreover, consumers who feel these emotions may indirectly reflect their emotions on the service organizations, which leads to a diminution of behavioral intentions (Kilian *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, it is also hypothesized that self-conscious emotions mediate the process during service experiences:

- H2a.* Witnessing (employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) verbal aggression during service experiences affects intentions toward service organizations through the elicitation of self-conscious emotions.

From the deonance perspective, customers who witness verbal aggression make an emotional connection with the victims and experience vicarious emotional reactions. The authors expect that witnesses experience different levels of vicarious self-conscious emotions in situations in which "employee-to-employee aggression" and "customer-to-customer aggression" occurs. It can be argued that the vicarious experience of self-conscious emotions during service experiences are role-bound.

Recent studies have shown that empathy is selective in nature (Bloom, 2017). The deonance perspective suggests that this selective nature depends on the power imbalance between first and third parties (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017), and the empathetic emotional evaluation of aggression is more likely to occur if the third-party is more powerful than the victim. In service contexts, frontline employees are mostly less powerful and less autonomous actors than customers (Akkawanitcha *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is expected that witnessing customers are more inclined to internalize the self-conscious emotions of victims who are employees rather than customers:

- H2b.* Self-conscious emotions are stronger when witnessing employee-to-employee verbal aggression rather than customer-to-customer aggression. There are no significant differences between employee-related and customer-related control conditions.

The role of empathic tendencies

Drawing on recent developments in deonance theory (Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017) and appraisal theory (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015), it is argued that empathy plays a critical role in third-party reactions to verbal aggression. According to Klimecki *et al.* (2016), empathy increases witnesses' willingness to punish unfair treatment and those who are responsible for it. Empathy refers to "a continuous process of imagining and attempting to understand another's a distinct emotional perspective on matters of personal significance" (Main *et al.*, 2017, p. 360). Empathy is critical for vicarious emotional experiences because it makes it possible to appraise the victim's situation in the same way as the target (Clark *et al.*, 2019). From the perspective of appraisal theory, the empathic emotional response of the witness is based on subjective evaluations of the victim's situation (Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015) and her/his empathetic tendencies (McBane, 1995). The empathetic tendency is a witness' concern, tendency or capacity to emphasize and internalize an appraised situation (Schrift and Amar, 2015; McBane, 1995). Self-conscious emotions are also vicariously experienced through empathic processes facilitated by empathic tendencies (Welten *et al.*, 2012; Miller, 1987). Previous studies have demonstrated that a greater tendency to empathize leads to a higher level of vicariously experienced self-conscious emotions during social experiences (Miller, 1987; Krach *et al.*, 2011). According to Kilian *et al.* (2018) empathy is a prerequisite for connecting emotions and cognitive appraisals of interpersonal processes for the third-party elicitation of self-conscious emotions. Therefore, it can be argued that witnessing customers who have a higher capacity for empathy can more easily imagine themselves in the position of the victims of aggression and feel self-conscious emotions more strongly. In this study, it is expected that the effects of witnessed aggressive behavior on self-conscious emotions will be more pronounced for customers with greater empathic tendencies:

- H3.* The effects of witnessing (employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) verbal aggression on self-conscious emotions are moderated by consumers' empathic tendencies. Witnessing aggression leads to

more strongly felt self-conscious emotions for customers with greater empathic tendencies.

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized relationships.

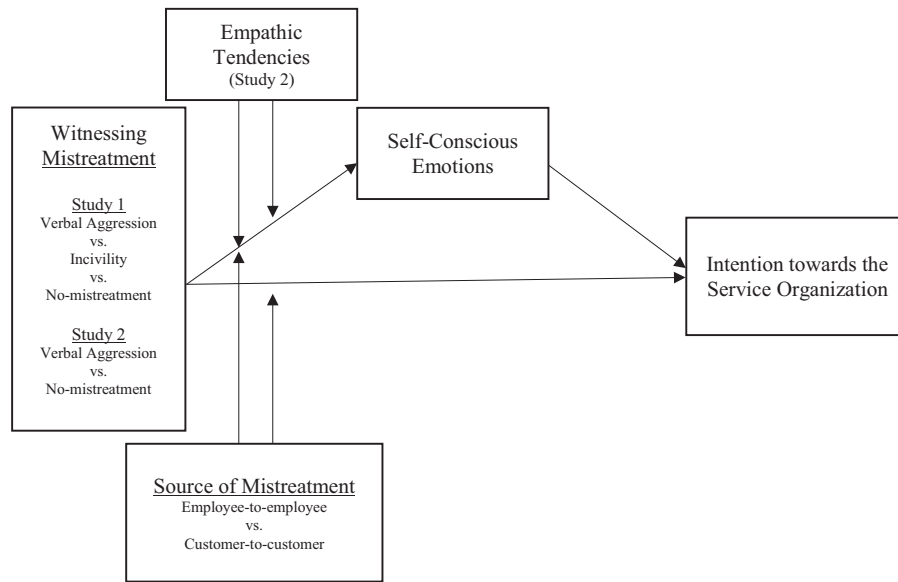
Pilot study: scenario development and preliminary tests

In line with prior experimental studies on third-party perspectives concerning mistreatment (Porath *et al.*, 2010; Henkel *et al.*, 2017), scenarios were used for the manipulations. To examine the distinctive effects of verbal aggression, we compared them with a no-mistreatment situation (control) and another type of interpersonal mistreatment, which is "incivility." As discussed earlier, aggression is a more severe, intense and directed form of interpersonal mistreatment compared to incivility (Porath *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is important to show the distinctive effects of verbally aggressive mistreatment (versus uncivil mistreatment) for the sake of construct clarity. It is argued here that the severity of mistreatment is crucial for the elicitation of self-conscious emotions because strong, intentional forms of verbal mistreatment (namely, aggression, Glomb and Liao, 2003) are clearer violations of moral norms of the social servicescape compared to low-level forms of mistreatment lacking intent (namely, incivility, Porath *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, in the pilot study the witnessed act of mistreatment was manipulated at three levels as follows: aggressive (high severity) mistreatment, uncivil (low severity) mistreatment and no mistreatment. A source of mistreatment manipulation was carried out via scenarios.

The context of the study – a restaurant setting with friends – is consistent with prior studies (Cai *et al.*, 2018). That situation was selected because all of the possible interactions between employees, customers and other customers can be witnessed (or observed) in the same locale. We tested the emotional and behavioral reactions to specific forms of aggression and incivility between two servers and between two other customers in the scenarios.

After several iterations, the severity of mistreatment (aggressive mistreatment vs uncivil mistreatment vs no-mistreatment) and source of mistreatment (employee-to-employee vs customer-to-customer) manipulations were set. The scenarios described the witnessing of cases of employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer verbal aggression after an unintentional service incident (tripping over an unoccupied chair). The situations of employee aggression and customer aggression contained swearing as a manifestation of verbal aggression (Rassin and Muris, 2005) ("Be careful, you f...g idiot. Walk properly!"). Following Porath *et al.* (2010), these scenarios were adapted to instances of uncivility of low intensity. In these uncivil conditions, participants read incidents with impolite interactions that did not include swearing ("Be careful, Walk properly!"). With the aim of making comparisons, two scenarios for cases of uncivil mistreatment and two scenarios for cases of no mistreatment (control) were also developed. The no-mistreatment situation described an unintentional service incident at a restaurant without any aggressive or uncivil interactions among employees or customers.

Figure 1 General framework of the studies



In total, 315 randomly assigned participants who were recruited from Amazon MTurk were asked about their perceptions concerning the respectfulness (Porath *et al.*, 2011), rudeness and incivility of the interactions described in the scenarios. A seven-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 7 (“strongly agree”) were used for all situations.

Variance analysis and post hoc tests demonstrated that the severity of the mistreatment manipulation successfully manipulated the aggression, incivility and no-mistreatment (control) conditions ($F = 231.45$, $p < 0.001$, CIs excluding zero). The results did not reveal any unexpected effects of source of mistreatment manipulation on the severity of the mistreatment manipulation ($F = 1.53$, $p > 0.10$). The interaction effects were also not significant ($F = 1.98$; $p > 0.10$).

Results indicated that the severity of mistreatment manipulation (via aggression and incivility and no mistreatment conditions in scenarios) was successfully and equivalently manipulated without any confounding effects for both the employee and customer conditions. Manipulation checks indicated independence of severity and source of mistreatment manipulations.

Finally, an analysis of the credibility check (Sparks and McColl-Kennedy, 2001), demonstrated that the aggression, incivility and control group means of believability (“the scenario is believable”) and perceived realism (“i think there are service situations like this in real life”) of the scenarios exceeded 5.73. Variance analysis also showed that there was no significant difference among the scenarios assigned to the six conditions ($p > 0.10$, for all). Therefore, the six scenarios in the pretest were used for the actual data collection (see Table I for the sample characteristics of all studies).

Study 1

In Study 1, the direct effects of witnessing multifoci verbal aggression on self-conscious emotions and intentions (*H1a* and

Table I Sample characteristics

Variables	Pilot study <i>N</i> = 315	Study 1 <i>N</i> = 295	Study 2 <i>N</i> = 236
Gender			
Female	145 (46%)	153 (52%)	131 (55,5%)
Male	170 (54%)	142 (48%)	105 (43,5%)
Education level			
High school	33 (11%)	43 (15%)	18 (7%)
Some college	105 (33%)	80 (27%)	90 (38%)
College degree	153 (49%)	137 (46%)	108 (45%)
Graduate degree	24 (8%)	19 (6%)	19 (8%)
Age			
18-25	78 (25%)	44 (15%)	63 (27%)
26-35	123 (39%)	120 (41%)	89 (38%)
36-45	73 (23%)	72 (24%)	54 (23%)
Over 45	38 (12%)	59 (20%)	30 (13%)

H2) and the indirect effects on intentions through self-conscious emotions were tested (*H2*) via scenario-based experiments. The scenarios developed in the pilot study were used. The differences between the effects of aggression among employees and aggression among customers were also tested (moderation of the source of mistreatment) (*H1b* and *H2b*). The authors tested the effects of witnessed aggression (high severity mistreatment) and incivility (low severity mistreatment) on customers’ intentions through self-conscious emotions in cases where the source of mistreatment was either other customers or employees.

In Study 1, it was also sought to test whether there are distinct roles involved in the elicitation of specific self-conscious emotions in evaluations of the witnessed aggressive behavior of employees and other customers. For that reason, in this study, negative self-conscious emotions (shame, embarrassment and guilt) were measured by distinct scales and

the model was analyzed not only with a composite self-conscious scale but also via scales for each emotion.

Procedure

Study 1 used a 3 (severity of mistreatment: aggressive vs uncivil vs no-mistreatment – control) \times 2 (source of mistreatment: employee vs other customer) between-subject factorial design. In total, 317 subjects recruited from Amazon MTurk were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental conditions. While MTurk is an appropriate platform for online experiments, subjects' attention to the experimental materials must be controlled (Kees *et al.*, 2017). In total, 15 responses were removed as they missed the attention check questions and 7 responses were removed because they reported that they failed to adopt the role of witness customer in the given scenario. Ultimately, 295 valid responses were used for the analysis (see Table I for the sample characteristics).

Measures

For this study, each negative self-conscious emotion (shame, embarrassment and guilt) was measured separately and then a composite scale of self-conscious emotions was created. Specifically, embarrassment (embarrassing, awkward, uncomfortable, Dahl *et al.*, 2001; $\alpha = 0.90$), shame (ashamed, humiliated, insecure, vulnerable, disgraced, Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Tangney *et al.*, 1996; $\alpha = 0.93$) and guilt (guilty, remorse, regret, Schmader and Lickel, 2006; $\alpha = 0.80$ [1]) scales were used. Participants indicated how they would feel in the situation described in the scenario. These emotions were measured using seven-point scales, anchored by “not at all” and “very.”

Following the conceptualization used by Cronin *et al.* (2000), behavioral intentions were measured via four items (items such as “I am satisfied with the restaurant in general,” “I did go this restaurant again” and “I did recommend this restaurant to friends and family” were used). For the manipulation checks, a “norm violation severity of mistreatment” scale was adapted for the witnessing customer perspective and combined with the aggression, incivility and injustice scales (Porath *et al.*, 2010; Rafaeli *et al.*, 2012) that were used in the experimental studies. The scale consisted of six items (*aggressive, respectful (R), rude, uncivil, norm violating and purposely harmful*) with a seven-point scale anchored by “not at all” and “very.” The participants evaluated the interaction between two people (two other customers or two employees).

Analyses and results of Study 1

Preliminary analysis: reliability and manipulation checks

The factor analysis results showed that all items loaded appropriately on their intended constructs. The items of shame, embarrassment and guilt were highly intercorrelated and loaded on a single construct, and to prevent multicollinearity, a composite score for the self-conscious emotions construct was created without any validity problems. The reliability coefficients of the scales were all above the suggested limits (Table II). All heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) were lower than 0.85, so discriminant validity was established for all constructs (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). All variance inflation factors were lower than 2.50,

suggesting no multicollinearity. Multi-item scales were averaged for further analysis.

Variance analysis was used for the manipulation checks of the severity of mistreatment. Comparison based on the severity of mistreatment scale showed that aggression and incivility manipulations had significant main effects on severity perceptions ($F = 273.59$; $p < 0.01$) with no other main effects ($F = 3.35$; $p > 0.05$) or interactional effects ($F = 0.04$; $p > 0.10$). Therefore, the results indicated that the scenarios successfully manipulated aggression and incivility without cross-manipulation.

Analytic approach

First, the hypotheses were tested using mean comparisons and then, similar to Sharma *et al.* (2016), hierarchical regression was used to examine the main effects (Model 1) and interaction effects (Model 2). Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro was used for mediation (Model 4) and moderated mediation (Model 8) analysis, which was widely used for analyzing scenario-based service experiments (Curth *et al.*, 2014; Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017; Henkel *et al.*, 2017). Sequential coding, as suggested by Hayes (2018) for ordinal multicategorical independent variables, was used to test the distinct effects of manipulated aggression and incivility. Two variables were created. D1 was produced by assuming that witnessing aggression and witnessing incivility are similar (D1: aggression = 1, incivility = 1, control = 0) and D2 was produced by assuming that aggression is distinct from incivility and the control groups (D2: aggression = 1, incivility = 0, control = 0). Thus, sequential coding provided two comparisons. First, the hypotheses were tested with D2, which showed the effects of witnessing aggression compared to witnessing incivility and the control groups. Second, the potential effects of witnessing incivility were controlled with D1, which showed the combined effects of witnessing aggression and incivility compared to the control groups.

Hypotheses tests

The results showed that customers felt more self-conscious emotions and their positive intentions toward the service organization decreased more when witnessing employee-to-employee aggression compared to no mistreatment ($t_{\text{self-conscious emotions}} (110) = 9.31$; $p < 0.001$; $t_{\text{intentions}} (110) = -8.95$; $p < 0.001$). Customers also felt more self-conscious emotions and their positive intentions toward the service organization decreased more when witnessing other customer aggression compared to the no mistreatment condition ($t_{\text{self-conscious emotions}} (88) = 3.01$; $p < 0.01$; $t_{\text{intentions}} (88) = -3.48$; $p < 0.01$). As expected, there were no significant differences between the self-conscious emotion levels for witnessing customer incivility and the control conditions, as well as intention levels (p 's > 0.05). On the other hand, witnessing employee and customer incivility lowered the intention score less than the no-mistreatment groups ($p < 0.05$). These results supported H1a and H2 (see Table III for the mean scores).

Main effects (Model 1)

The results revealed the significant main effects of D2 (aggression-only) on self-conscious emotions ($\beta = 0.42$, $t = 7.27$, $p < 0.001$) and intentions ($\beta = -0.30$, $t = -5.16$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1a and H2. As expected, D1 (aggression

Table II Studies 1 and 2 correlations

Scales	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Empathic tendencies	−0.84	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Intentions	0.04	0.95; 0.95	−0.53	−0.43	−0.30	0.15	0.05	—	−0.50	−0.47	−0.47
3. Self-conscious emotions	0.17	−0.48	0.90; 0.93	0.51	0.17	−0.17	−0.18	—	0.95	0.87	0.83
4. Severity of aggression	0.02	−0.43	0.52	0.95; 0.96	−0.06	−0.05	−0.04	—	0.45	0.53	0.39
5. Source of mistreatment	−0.01	−0.25	0.17	0.04	—	0.02	0.01	—	0.15	0.15	0.18
6. Age	0.12	0.07	−0.09	0.01	−0.01	—	−0.03	—	−0.15	−0.26	−0.06
7. Gender	−0.27	−0.07	−0.01	0.07	−0.10	−0.10	—	—	−0.12	−0.26	−0.06
8. Negative emotions	−0.34	−0.24	0.54	0.46	0.21	0.05	−0.11	−0.84	—	—	—
9. Shame	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.90	0.69	0.83
10. Embarrassment	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.92	0.59
11. Guilt	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	−0.78

Notes: Study 1 is above the diagonal and Study 2 is below the diagonal. The reliability scores of Studies 1 and 2 (α) are presented along the diagonal, respectively. Gender is coded 0 for female and 1 for male. Source of mistreatment is coded 0 for “customer-to-customer mistreatment” and 1 for “employee-to-employee mistreatment”

Table III Means and standard deviations of Studies 1 and 2

	Means (SD) of conditions					
	Employee-to- employee aggression	Customer-to- customer aggression	Employee-to- employee incivility	Customer-to- customer incivility	Employee control	Customer control
Constructs						
Self-conscious	4.14 (1.24)	2.74 (1.26)	2.29 (1.01)	2.35 (1.35)	2.06 (1.13)	1.99 (1.03)
Emotions	3.74 (1.70)	2.74 (1.73)			1.96 (1.23)	1.90 (1.14)
Shame	3.52 (1.42)	2.25 (1.35)	1.86 (1.14)	1.91 (0.99)	1.71 (1.19)	1.73 (1.10)
Guilt	3.99 (1.40)	2.40 (1.24)	2.05 (0.99)	2.19 (1.17)	1.85 (1.18)	1.71 (1.12)
Embarrassment	5.33 (1.46)	3.92 (1.69)	3.25 (1.26)	3.24 (1.73)	2.83 (1.43)	2.72 (1.37)
Intentions	3.20 (1.42)	4.77 (1.25)	4.50 (1.12)	5.10 (1.10)	5.26 (0.95)	5.54 (0.78)
	3.43 (1.57)	4.75 (1.19)			5.39 (0.98)	5.50 (0.99)
Manipulation checks						
Severity of mistreatment	6.18 (1.04)	6.38 (0.78)	4.56 (1.12)	4.84 (0.98)	2.59 (1.17)	2.81 (1.30)
	6.43 (0.75)	6.42 (0.83)			2.70 (1.23)	3.15 (1.40)
Credibility checks						
Believability	5.95 (1.31)	6.39 (0.92)	6.32 (1.02)	6.07 (1.00)	6.02 (1.00)	6.07 (1.02)
	6.05 (1.19)	6.14 (1.15)			5.92 (1.30)	5.90 (1.16)
Perceived realism	5.65 (1.19)	5.95 (1.16)	6.20 (0.99)	5.58 (1.27)	5.95 (0.91)	5.91 (1.19)
	6.03 (1.06)	5.92 (1.08)			5.91 (1.17)	5.85 (1.08)

Note: Italics presents the means and standard deviations of Study 2

and incivility) only affected intentions ($\beta = -0.21$, $t = 3.59$, $p < 0.01$) and did not elicit self-conscious emotions ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = 1.57$, $p > 0.10$).

Moderation effects (Model 2)

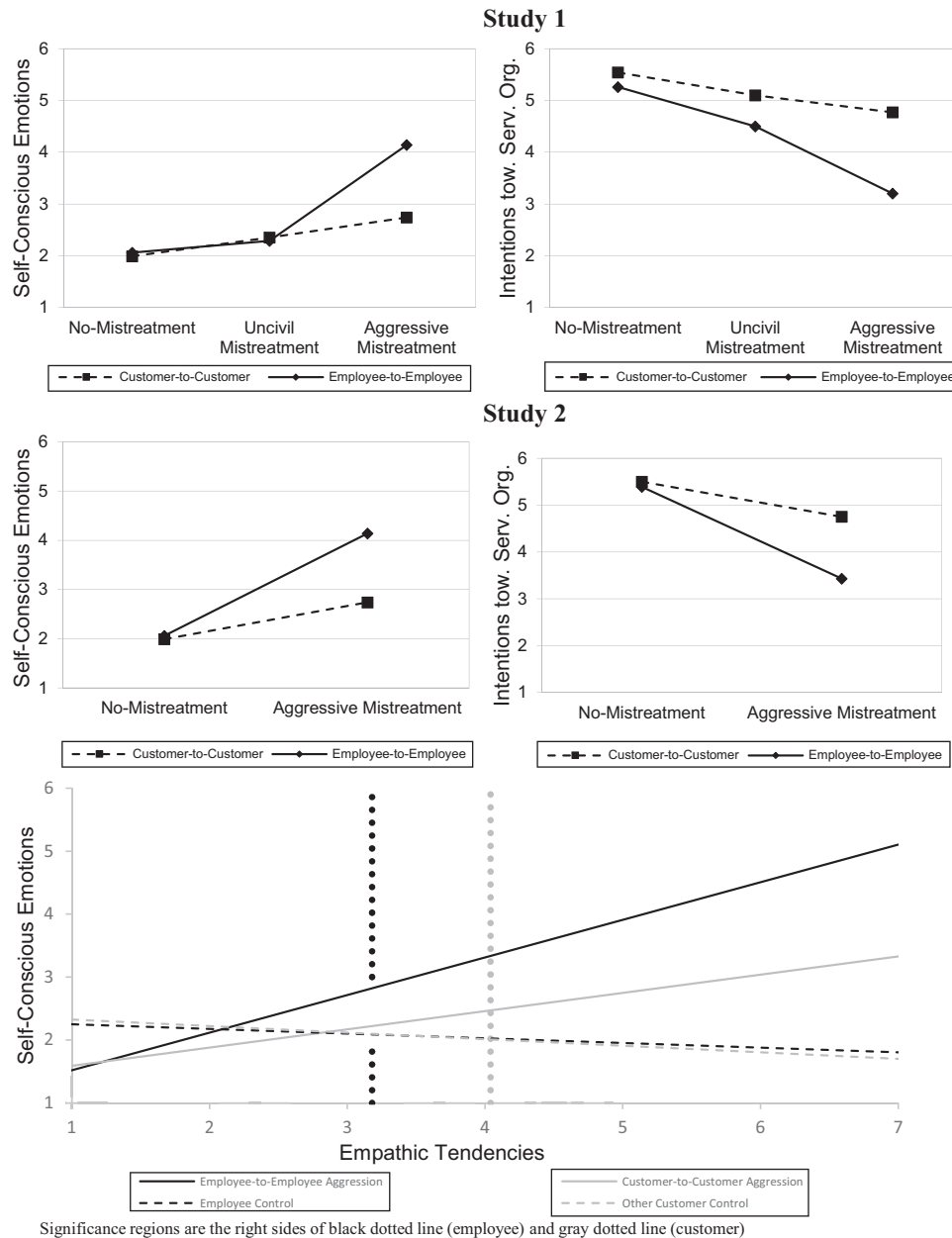
The results revealed significant two-way interaction for D2 (aggression only) and source of mistreatment regarding self-conscious emotions ($\beta = -0.29$, $t = 4.16$, $p < 0.001$, Figure 2) and intentions ($\beta = -0.19$, $t = -2.80$, $p < 0.01$, Figure 2). Notably, there was no significant interaction between D1 (aggression and incivility) and the source of mistreatment on self-conscious emotions and intentions (all p 's > 0.05). To probe significant interactions, slope analysis was conducted. The effects of D2 (aggression only) on self-conscious emotions and intentions were more pronounced for the condition of employees ($\beta_{\text{self-conscious}} = 1.81$, $t = 7.99$, $p < 0.001$;

$\beta_{\text{intentions}} = -1.26$, $t = -5.76$, $p < 0.001$) compared to the condition of other customer aggression ($\beta_{\text{self-conscious emotions}} = 0.47$, $t = 1.95$, $p < 0.10$; $\beta_{\text{intentions}} = -0.35$, $t = -1.45$, $p < 0.10$), supporting *H1b* and *H2b*. The main effects of the control variables (gender and age) were found to be partly significant. Additionally, while age had a significant effect on both Models 1 and 2, gender did not play a role in Model 2.

Mediation and moderated mediation analysis

In support of the mediation prediction (*H2b*), bootstrapping (Hayes, 2018; Model 4) revealed that while the indirect pathway from D1 (aggression and incivility) to intentions through self-conscious emotions was insignificant, the pathway from D2 (aggression-only) to intentions was significant ($\beta = -0.55$; *CI*: -0.78 to -0.35). The moderated mediation pathway (Model 8; $n = 10,000$) from D2 (aggression only) and

Figure 2 Studies 1 and 2 conditions



source of mistreatment interaction to intentions through self-conscious emotions was also significant and did not include zero ($\beta = -0.50$; $CI: -0.81$ to -0.23). This indirect path also eliminated the direct interaction effect, and hence, it was found to be insignificant ($p > 0.10$). In contrast to D2 (aggression only; all CI's excluded zero), the pathway from D1 (aggression and incivility) to intentions through self-conscious emotions was not significant (Table IV).

Supplementary analysis

With the aim of testing the potential distinctive effects of each self-conscious emotion, all of the analyses were rerun with shame, guilt and embarrassment separately instead of using a composite self-conscious emotional scale. All analyses

produced similar results and supported all of the hypotheses. The only difference was that feelings of guilt were elicited less for the condition of other customer aggression ($p < 0.10$) compared to shame ($p < 0.05$) and embarrassment ($p < 0.01$). These three constructs were not defined as multiple mediators in a mediation model because of the high level of intercorrelation among these constructs (Hayes, 2018).

Therefore, when high-level purposeful mistreatment (aggression) and low-level mistreatment (incivility) were assumed to be distinct types of mistreatment (D2, aggression only), witnessing aggression affected intentions toward the service organization directly and indirectly through self-conscious emotions. Also, as expected, when a customer was the source of aggression, intentions toward the service

Table IV Model coefficients for Study 1 analysis

Main and moderation effects					
	Self-conscious emotions			Intentions	
Predictors	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)	Model 3 β (SE)
Intercept	3.10 (0.34)**	3.16 (0.34)	5.04 (0.34)**	4.87 (0.34)**	5.97 (0.38)**
D1 (aggression + incivility)	0.09 (0.16)	0.09 (0.16)	−0.21 (0.17)**	−0.20 (0.16)**	−0.18 (0.15)
D2 (aggression only)	0.42 (0.17)**	0.39 (0.16)**	−0.30 (0.17)**	−0.28 (0.16)**	−0.16 (0.16)*
Source	0.18 (0.13)**	0.05 (0.22)	−0.30 (0.13)**	−0.11 (0.22)	−0.10 (0.21)
Self-conscious emotions	—	—	—	—	−0.32 (0.06)**
Age	−0.13 (0.01)*	−0.12 (0.01)*	0.11 (0.01)*	0.11 (0.01)*	0.06 (0.01)
Gender	−0.18 (0.13)**	−0.16 (0.13)**	0.06 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)	−0.01 (0.13)
D1 × Source	—	−0.04 (0.16)	—	−0.10 (0.16)	−0.11 (0.15)
D2 × Source	—	0.29 (0.16)**	—	−0.19 (0.16)**	−0.11 (0.16)
Mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 4)					
Predictor	Direct effect on intentions		Indirect effect on intentions ^a		
Severity of mistreatment	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	β (BSE)	LLCI/ULCI	
D1	−0.48 (0.16)	−3.05**	−0.13 (0.07)	−0.28/0.01	
D2	−0.32 (0.17)	−1.86	−0.55 (0.11)	−0.78/−0.35	
Moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 8)					
Severity of mistreatment					
D1 (customer condition)	−0.29 (0.22)	−1.30	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.31/0.05	
D2 (customer condition)	−0.18 (0.23)	−0.79	−0.17 (0.10)	−0.36/0.00	
D1 (employee condition)	−0.67 (0.20)	−3.28**	−0.07 (0.08)	−0.23/0.07	
D2 (employee condition)	−0.60 (0.23)	−2.62**	−0.67 (0.14)	−0.95/−0.41	
Index of moderated mediation			−0.50 (0.15)	−0.82/−0.23	
Notes: 10,000 bootstrapping samples. Presented here are the standardized regression coefficients from the bootstrapping analysis and their associated standard errors (SE), <i>t</i> -statistics and lower and upper levels for the confidence interval (ULCI/LLCI). * <i>p</i> < 0.05; ** <i>p</i> < 0.01. ^a through self-conscious emotions					

Notes: 10,000 bootstrapping samples. Presented here are the standardized regression coefficients from the bootstrapping analysis and their associated standard errors (SE), *t*-statistics and lower and upper levels for the confidence interval (ULCI/LLCI). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. ^athrough self-conscious emotions

organization were affected less than when the source was an employee.

Study 2

Study 2 focused on the condition of aggression. The direct effects and moderation of the source of mistreatment were replicated (*H1a*, *H1b*, *H2*, *H2a* and *H2b*) and the moderating effect of empathy, which was not tested in Study 1, was tested in this study (*H3*). Using a similar procedure as in Study 1, the hypothesized relations were tested via a scenario-based experimental design.

Method and procedure

Study 2 used a 2 (witnessing aggression vs no mistreatment, control) × 2 (source of mistreatment: employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer) between-subject factorial design. A total of 248 subjects were recruited from Amazon MTurk and randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. In total, 12 responses were removed because of failed attention checks and unsuccessful adoption of the role of witness customer in the given scenario. In total, 236 valid responses were used for the analysis (Table I).

After imagining themselves in the assigned scenario, participants were asked to rate how strongly they felt self-conscious emotions and other basic emotions (“sorry” and

“bad”) in that situation. The subjects then rated their behavioral intentions (engaging in word of mouth, revisiting the organization) regarding the restaurant. Following the manipulation check questions, the subjects were asked to do a filler task in which they responded to unrelated questions. Finally, they provided answers to questions concerning items for measuring empathic tendencies and demographics.

Measures

Empathic tendencies were measured using the three-item scale of McBane (1995)[2]. As the effects of shame, guilt and embarrassment displayed no significant differences when examined separately in Study 1, a more simplified self-conscious emotional scale, which included single items for each emotion (shame, embarrassment and guilt) was used in this experiment. The remainder of the measures (including the manipulation checks) were the same as in Study 1.

Analyses and results of Study 2

Preliminary analysis: reliability and manipulation checks

The reliability coefficients of the scales were all above the suggested limits. The factor analysis results showed that the scale items were loaded appropriately on their intended constructs with no cross-loadings greater than 0.50. The correlations between all the constructs were also less than 0.50 (Table II). All of the HTMT results are lower than 0.85,

indicating that discriminant validity had been established for all constructs. All variance inflation factors were lower than 2.00, suggesting no multicollinearity. The multi-item scales were averaged for further analysis.

For the manipulation checks, variance analysis was conducted to compare aggression for the four conditions. As expected, the results demonstrated that aggression manipulation had significant main effects on the perceived severity of mistreatment ($F = 592.02, p < 0.01$). Moreover, the results revealed no unexpected effects of source manipulation on the perceived severity of mistreatment, and the interactional effects were also insignificant (p 's > 0.10). Finally, the undesirable effects of aggression manipulations on the empathic tendencies measure were checked. Variance analysis revealed no significant main effects for aggression manipulation, source of mistreatment or the interactional effects of these manipulations ($p > 0.10$, for all), suggesting that there was no cross-manipulation or interaction among the manipulations. Thus, empathic tendencies and source of mistreatment constructs were used as moderators in the model without any validity issues.

Analytic approach

Hierarchical regression was used to examine the main effects (Model 1) and interaction effects (Model 2). Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro was used for the moderated mediation analysis.

Hypotheses tests

The main effects of the variance analysis showed that customers felt more self-conscious emotions and their positive intentions toward the service organization were lower when witnessing aggression compared to no mistreatment ($F_{\text{self-conscious emotions}} = 46.71, p < 0.001$; $F_{\text{intentions}} = -73.75, p < 0.001$). The main effects of the source of mistreatment also demonstrated that the condition of employee aggression elicited self-conscious emotions more strongly compared to the condition of other customers ($F_{\text{self-conscious}} = 7.64, p < 0.01$; $F_{\text{intentions}} = -20.60, p < 0.001$). Thus, *H1a* and *H2* were supported (see Table III for the means).

Main effects (Model 1)

The main effects-only models showed a significant positive effect for witnessing aggression on self-conscious emotions ($\beta = 0.42; p < 0.01$) and on intentions ($\beta = -0.37; p < 0.01$). The results also revealed a significant negative effect on self-conscious emotions on intentions ($\beta = -0.36; p < 0.01$). Thus, *H1a* and *H2* were confirmed. The main effects of the control variables (gender and age, $p > 0.05$ for all) and general negative emotions ($\beta = -0.127; p > 0.05$) were insignificant (Table V).

Moderation analysis (Model 2)

The results revealed significant two-way interactions between aggression and source of mistreatment on self-conscious emotions ($\beta = 0.26; p < 0.01$) and intentions ($\beta = -0.30; p < 0.001$). They also indicated significant two-way interactions between aggression and empathic tendencies on self-conscious emotions ($\beta = 0.85; p < 0.01$, Figure 2) and intentions ($\beta = -0.54; p < 0.001$). After the interaction scores were added to Model 2, all of the main effects became insignificant ($p > 0.05$) except for the effect of aggression on self-conscious emotions ($\beta = -0.297; p < 0.001$). The Johnson-Neyman technique

(Hayes, 2018) was used to examine the interactions and identify significant regions. For the employee condition, the effect of witnessing employee aggression on self-conscious emotions was significant if consumers' empathic levels were higher than 3.18 (15.08 per cent of participants were below that level). For the condition of other customers, those effects were significant if participants' empathic levels were higher than 4.04 (27.27 per cent of the participants were below that level). Thus, *H1b*, *H2b* and *H3* were confirmed.

Moderated mediation analysis

PROCESS macro Model 10 (Hayes, 2018) was used to test the effect of multiple interactions, which were tested in the previous moderation analysis, concerning intentions toward the service organization with the mediation of self-conscious emotions. In support of the prediction, for the condition of witnessing employee aggression bootstrapping ($n = 10,000$) revealed that the pathway from both interactions to intentions through self-conscious emotions (indirect effects) were significant and excluded zero (source of mistreatment moderated mediation $CI: -0.46$ to -0.04 , empathic tendencies moderated mediation $CI: -0.22$ to -0.04). Thus, both empathetic tendencies and the source of aggression moderated the mediated relationship of witnessing mistreatment with intentions toward the service organization through self-conscious emotions.

Discussion

Table VI provides an overview of the results of the studies that were conducted. In support of the theoretical framework and hypothesized relations, the results demonstrate that witnessing verbal aggression during service experiences negatively influences customers' intentions toward the service organization both directly and indirectly through self-conscious emotions. In other words, consumers who witness verbal aggression demonstrate a lower level of behavioral intentions toward the organization as a result of vicariously experienced self-conscious emotions. The results also reveal that when customers witness other customers being verbally aggressive with each other, their intentions toward the service organization are influenced less negatively than when they witness employees being verbally aggressive. Moreover, the significance of all direct and emotion-mediated indirect paths is dependent on empathic tendencies, especially for the condition of other customers. Last but not least, we found that witnessing mild interpersonal mistreatment (incivility) does not elicit self-conscious emotions, which supports the distinctive characteristics of aggressive mistreatment in this context. We believe that the results of this study offer a number of theoretical contributions to the literature and have various implications for marketers and service managers.

Theoretical contributions

Although researchers have primarily emphasized the issue of direct victimization during service experiences, third-party effects have recently begun garnering attention as well. This study, which represents one of the first attempts to examine the consequences of multifoci aggressive behavior from the perspective of third-party consumers, mainly contributes to the literature by revealing appraisal processes of self-conscious emotions and the reactions of customers when they witness

Table V Model coefficients for Study 2 analysis

Predictors	Self-conscious emotions		Intentions	
	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)	Model 1 β (SE)	Model 2 β (SE)
Main and moderation effects				
Intercept	1.54 (0.50)**	−0.08 (0.57)	5.80 (0.41)**	4.80 (0.49)**
Witnessing aggression	0.42 (0.19)**	−0.52 (0.67)*	−0.37 (0.18)**	0.29 (0.56)
Empathic tendencies	0.21 (0.07)**	−0.06 (0.10)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.19 (0.08)*
Source of mistreatment	0.16 (0.19)**	0.02 (0.25)	−0.20 (0.16)**	−0.06 (0.21)
Self-conscious emotions	—	—	−0.36 (0.06)**	−0.29 (0.06)**
Age	−0.11 (0.09)	−0.06 (0.09)	0.02 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)
Gender	0.03 (0.20)	0.03 (0.19)	−0.04 (0.16)	−0.04 (0.16)
Negative emotions	—	—	−0.13 (0.06)	0.13 (0.06)
Interaction I	—	0.85 (0.13)**	—	−0.55 (0.11)**
Interaction II	—	0.26 (0.36)**	—	−0.30 (0.30)**
Moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS Model 10)				
	Direct effect on intentions		Indirect effect on intentions ^a	
<i>Empathic tendencies level</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	β (BSE)	LLCI/ULCI
3.33 (customer condition)	−0.10 (0.27)	−0.38	−0.01 (0.07)	−0.14/0.15
6.33 (customer condition)	−1.01 (0.28)	−3.59**	−0.35 (0.12)	−0.63/−0.14
3.33 (employee condition)	−1.11 (0.26)	−4.24**	−0.22 (0.09)	−0.42/−0.06
6.33 (employee condition)	−2.02 (0.30)	−6.85**	−0.56 (0.18)	−0.95/−0.24
<i>Index of empathic tendencies-moderated mediation</i>			−0.11 (0.05)	−0.22/−0.04
<i>Index of source of mistreatment-moderated mediation</i>			−0.21 (0.11)	−0.46/−0.04

Notes: 10,000 bootstrapping samples. Interaction I: interaction of witnessing aggression and empathic tendencies. Interaction; II: interaction of witnessing aggression and source of mistreatment; Presented here are the standardized regression coefficients from the bootstrapping analysis and their associated standard errors (SE), *t*-statistics and lower and upper levels for the confidence interval (ULCI/LLCI). * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. ^athrough self-conscious emotions

Table VI Overview of studies and findings

Hypotheses	Independent	Dependent	Method	Study 1	Study 2
H1a	Witnessing aggression	Intentions	<i>t</i> -test and hierarchical regression	Supported	Supported
H1b	Witnessing aggression \times source of aggression	Intentions	Hierarchical regression	Supported	Supported
H2	Witnessing aggression	Self-conscious emotions	<i>t</i> -test and regression	Supported	Supported
H2a	Witnessing aggression	Intentions via self-conscious emotions	Mediation analysis	Supported	Supported
H2b	Witnessing aggression \times source of aggression	Self-conscious emotions	Hierarchical regression	Supported	Supported
H3	Witnessing aggression \times empathic tendencies	Self-conscious emotions	Hierarchical regression	N/A	Supported
Model test 1	Witnessing aggression \times source of aggression	Intentions via self-conscious emotions	Moderated mediation (Model 8)	Supported	Supported
Model test 2	Witnessing aggression \times empathic tendencies \times source of aggression	Intentions via self-conscious emotions	Moderated mediation (Model 10)	N/A	Supported

employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer verbal aggression in service settings.

First, this study fills an important gap in the services literature by investigating the critical role of self-conscious emotions in situations marked by moral violations and shedding light on the mechanisms underlying the emotional appraisals by witnesses. The study confirms that in contrast to uncivil and control conditions, witnessing (verbal) aggression plays a distinct role in facilitating the appraisal of self-conscious emotions and that the elicitation of self-conscious emotions has a severe negative impact on intentions.

Second, by drawing on appraisal theory and deonance theory, this study expands on our understanding of self-conscious emotions. Previous studies mainly argued that the vicarious experience of such emotions occurs only if witnesses attribute the moral violation of others' behavior to themselves (Lickel *et al.*, 2005). However, this study empirically confirms that these emotions have the potential to spread to others, depending on the strength of witnesses' empathic tendencies. The results also demonstrate that the causal relationship between self-conscious emotions and verbal aggression is strengthened by witnesses' tendency to empathize with others.

Therefore, even if witnessing customers do not attribute any blame to themselves, empathy leads to the spread of self-conscious emotions. [Hershcovis and Bhatnagar \(2017\)](#) posit that state empathy is crucial for witness appraisal of cases of service actor mistreatment; this study supports and extends their findings by demonstrating the role of empathic tendencies.

Thirdly, by adopting a multifoci approach, this study shows how service roles affect our evaluations and appraisals. It was found that witnessing employee-to-employee verbal aggression has a stronger effect on self-conscious emotions and intentions toward service organizations than witnessing customer-to-customer verbal aggression. The stronger impact of the former on intentions was more or less expected but its powerful effect on self-conscious emotions indicates that service roles are also critical for determining the basic emotional states of customers who witness such events. These results suggest that the power asymmetry between third-party customers and first-party employees makes the emotional connection with the less-powerful actor (employees) more nuanced than the connection with actors with equal power (first-party other customers). Results show that witnessing customer-to-customer verbal aggression has a significant effect on self-conscious emotions and intentions but only for customers with high levels of empathic tendencies. This supports [Albrecht et al. \(2017\)](#)'s study, which argues certain boundary conditions determine the influence of other customer mistreatments on focal customer outcomes.

Finally, the distinctive nature of verbal aggression from incivility and other interpersonal mistreatments is rarely supported by recent studies ([Henkel et al., 2017](#); [Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017](#)). These studies found witnessing incivility and witnessing verbal aggression both elicit similar emotions (such as warmth and empathy to victims). This study, however, also contributes to the literature by demonstrating the distinctive effects of profound verbal aggression (such as swearing) on a specific group of emotions (self-conscious emotions), which may not be elicited by low-intense uncivil mistreatments.

Managerial implications

Self-conscious emotions generating instances (i.e. verbal aggression) may be destructive. These emotions, especially shame, are entirely social and relational and they have the power to destroy the relationship between a customer and service organization. If service organizations do not deal with elicited self-conscious emotions, the symptoms will either remain at the same level or worsen ([Retzinger, 1998](#)). For that reason, service managers and employees can try to reestablish the social bonds between the service organization and customers who witness verbal aggression whether it occurs between customers or among employees.

The findings of this study should serve as a warning for service managers and help them during cases of intentionally harmful and morally violating aggressive behavior, which is displayed by both frontline employees and other customers in service environments. During such service experiences, the number of customers who are directly subjected to verbal aggression is far less than the number of customers witnessing the situation. Verbal aggression is a severe and visible form of

dysfunctional behavior thus service managers must strive to prevent outbursts of aggression and avoid aggression-inducing interactions, especially during social service experiences. Much has been written about the drivers of verbal aggression in the literature on psychology and organizational behavior and controlling these drivers can be helpful in preventing employee aggression and customer aggression to a certain extent. Verbally aggressive customer-to-customer behaviors, on the other hand, can be very hard to predict and control. Nevertheless, service managers can provide training programs for both supervisors and frontline employees that teach them how to respond to and intervene in cases of aggressive interactions between customers in the servicescape.

Aggressive behavior involves acts that are intentional harmful so managers may need to go beyond compatibility management practices, which propose managing the well-being of a given service environment by targeting and attracting customers with similar characteristics, and thus, easing the management of customer-to-customer relationships ([Martin and Pranter, 1989](#); [Cai et al., 2018](#)). Our findings highlight the importance of dealing with violations of moral norms, and uncertainty management ([Colquitt and Zipay, 2015](#); [Lind and Van den Bos, 2002](#)) may be the tool needed to help manage the justice perceptions of witnessing customers. Consistent with deonance theory, uncertainty management suggests that witnesses need certainty, especially managerial certainty about morality, to deal with such violations ([Colquitt and Zipay, 2015](#)). In support of our framework, previous studies have also shown that uncertainty about instances of moral violations leads to self-conscious emotions ([De Cremer et al., 2008](#)). Therefore, witnesses need to feel a sense of certainty about a service organization's approach to fair management, as well as about perpetrators' intentions ([Thau et al., 2009](#)). First, service organizations should clarify their public image through formal rules, which make it clear that aggressive mistreatment will not be tolerated and that there will be punitive consequences. Second, during both employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer incidents of verbal aggression, managers can actively intervene as a means of showing witnessing customers that they maintain consistent impartiality. Third, after the incident, managers can provide explanations related to the incident for the purposes of clarification and/or justification.

In this study, we identified two boundary conditions that support service managers in the control of negative emotional appraisals and their spillover effects on service organizations. First, our customer-employee comparison suggests that the power asymmetry between customers and employees increases the self-conscious emotions of witnessing customers. Service managers should empower their frontline employees and make this process more visible to customers. Based on our findings, it can be argued that constructing a power-balanced service environment may limit the aggrieving effects of empathic emotional sharing and its spillover on organizations. Second, our results stress the importance of empathic tendencies. Service managers can also try to prevent the elicitation of the self-conscious emotions of customers who witness incidents of verbal aggression by providing more information about the outburst and validating it, as third parties experience such emotions if they are uncertain about the intentions of the perpetrators ([Priesemuth et al., 2017](#)). On a related point, after

such incidents, service and marketing managers may contact customers who witnessed the situation and try to explain the moral violation that occurred. If and when service organizations provide a sense of fairness so that the witnesses perceive the behavior as being “fair,” those self-conscious emotions that were induced by the moral violation may taper off.

Limitations and future research directions

First of all, this study was limited by its use of scenario-based online experiments and simulated experiences. Despite their contributions to the literature, the results indicate that additional research on verbal aggression in service contexts is needed, and field experiments could be helpful in increasing the generalizability of the results. In addition, using visual materials (such as video clips or photographs) could also be effective in eliciting self-conscious emotions.

Our research demonstrates how the service roles of perpetrators and/or victims (as customers or employees) are important for evaluations of verbal aggression by witnessing customers. Employee-to-employee and customer-to-customer aggression differ from other forms of aggression because in these interactions the witnessing of customers’ power relationship with the perpetrator and the victim is one and the same. However, there are several other service-specific (i.e. supervisors) and/or permanent roles (i.e. gender roles) that could extend the multifoci framework of this study. Such an extension could make it possible to evaluate how the power asymmetry between perpetrators and victims affects the reactions of witnesses. As regards the perspective of witnessing customers, [Henkel et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Hershcovis and Bhatnagar \(2017\)](#) have contributed to the literature by providing an in-depth examination of customer-to-employee (powerful-to-less powerful) cases of mistreatment. Further studies could also look into the point of view of employees or customer reactions when they witness supervisor mistreatment.

While this study investigates the emotional elicitations of witnesses who are bystanders, the social connections between observers and victims remain little explored. Witnesses’ social and physical proximity to the people involved in incidents can be important for the elicitation of vicariously experienced self-conscious emotions ([Lickel et al., 2005](#); [Henkel et al., 2017](#)). An examination of in-group vs out-group factors, social closeness, friendship and perceived threats could have important implications for service organizations.

Adopting appraisal theory, the current study focuses on emotional elicitation through the evaluation of events rather than the emotions displayed by perpetrators and victims ([Wondra and Ellsworth, 2015](#)). However, witnesses’ perceptions of the emotions of victims have the potential to elicit a more direct emotional mechanism, which is often referred to as emotional contagion. Through the use of visual materials, further studies could investigate the effects of victims’ emotional reactions (i.e. feeling ashamed, distraught or neutral) on verbal aggression. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that witnesses can be supportive of victims after the instances of mistreatment ([Henkel et al., 2017](#); [Hershcovis and Bhatnagar, 2017](#)). An investigation of further contact between witnesses and victims could influence the extent of self-conscious emotions. Examining the intervention strategies of managers (i.e. apologies or monetary compensation, [Karabas](#)

[et al., 2019](#)) in such instances may be helpful in understanding whether it is possible to assuage self-conscious emotions.

Some scholars have argued that shame, embarrassment and guilt may have distinct characteristics ([Tangney et al., 1996](#)). As was discussed, in this study, we performed additional analysis for those emotions and identified distinct levels of elicitation. However, a strong intercorrelation between the shame, embarrassment and guilt scales (>0.60 for all) rendered meaningless the simultaneous inclusion of all of them. Future research could investigate the distinctive effects of shame, embarrassment and guilt during service interactions. Earlier studies dealing with service contexts focused for the most part on the detrimental effects of embarrassment ([Wu and Mattila, 2013](#); [Kilian et al., 2018](#)). Further studies could focus primarily on shame, which can be more destructive than embarrassment and guilt in specific incidents of moral violations, such as witnessing an instance of shoplifting in retail settings.

In this study, the scenarios presented a situation in which the verbally aggressive behavior of customers and employees occurs after a trivial service incident. However, it may be important to examine whether witnessing customers find cases of aggressive behavior justifiable after serious service failures. A recent study showed that after service failures customers expect that the frontline employees who are responsible will be punished ([Pugh et al., 2018](#)). Further studies could examine the effects of aggression as a punitive mechanism following severe service failures.

As a related issue, the perceived criticality (or involvement) of service experience can represent an important boundary condition that has the potential to more strongly elicit negative emotions ([Bambauer-Sachse and Rabeson, 2015](#)). In line with previous experimental studies ([Cai et al., 2018](#)), the scenarios used in our experiments consist of somewhat moderate service experience in terms of criticality (going to a restaurant with friends). Although one recent study did not find that criticality played a role in witnessing instances of mistreatment ([Kim and Baker, 2019](#)), further studies could explore its effects by manipulating various criticality levels in a broader range of service contexts.

Notes

1. One-item in the guilt scale was dropped because it caused significant problems for inter-item reliability.
2. Items were “other people’s misfortunes usually disturb me a great deal”, “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person” and “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”

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